

*Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino (*trans.* William Weaver) (London: Vintage, 1974)

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*Invisible Cities* is presented as a conversation between effervescent narrators. Marco Polo, Venetian explorer and *de facto* ethnographer of Western, Central, and East Asian cities and Kublai Khan, emperor of the Mongolian Empire and grandson of Genghis Khan. The two sit in silent contemplation, or conversation, or over a game of chess, or watching the Khan's capital city move and writhe beneath them. Calvino uses this conversation to present Polo's work to the reader.

When you open Calvino's 1972 masterpiece and begin to read, you think, "This fool has put his best writing right up front. There's no way he can keep up this quality forever!" But, reader, he *does*. While some people may try to understand *Invisible Cities* as a novel or a work of literary merit, that is not all that it is. It is better understood as an instruction on how anthropologists can convey the truth of their subject of study. Some things cannot be counted. If our discipline as anthropologists and ethnographers asks us to convey human creations, Marco Polo teaches us to describe the truth of a city, regardless of its empirical realities.

Marco Polo describes cities in short vignettes. Uniquely, he describes his subjects in purely qualitative terms. He possesses a rare ability to distill the essential understanding of a city and to communicate its profound truth to the Khan. Anthropology in Marco Polo's style would be impossible in contemporary U.S. cities. Martin Heavy Head wrote of his time in the so-called U.S., saying, "culture is gentrified. There is no local flavour any more. It's all McDonalds, Chilis [*sic*], & WalMart in every town. One big strip mall. Driving through is like a Flintstones backdrop. Every town looks the same. Same music on the radio. Same food. Same ugly, everywhere." What Heavy Head calls *local flavour* is what an anthropologist might call *qualitative analysis*. It's what a longtime resident of a town might call *spirit* or *ghost*, depending on whether they still believe in the city and its promises and threats.

Polo's ability to capture the essence of a city is unique, but it is his prose in his reports to the Khan that is the true mark of the participant anthropologist. "The foreigner had learned to speak the emperor's language or the emperor to understand the language of the foreigner." In order to communicate a city to an audience, one cannot rely on quantitative measurements alone. Polo acknowledges the usefulness of quantizing but only in the sense that a "city does not consist of [the numbers and angles of its construction], but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet." In describing cities, Polo endeavors to convey how to understand a city. He forces us to ask ourselves, "What are the true stakes of anthropology? What is there to be gained or lost in the communication?" As Polo says, "It is

not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.”

Polo knows that his audience is not made up of scholars. This does not mean that he does not demand excellence from his readers. Polo has a particularly difficult mission. Polo is a double anthropologist—first, he is the Khan’s “informant”<sup>1</sup> and the Khan is the ethnographer. His reports of the many cities in the Khan’s vast empire allow the Khan to study the urban and human-caused natures of the land under his jurisdiction. Polo’s second mission is as an anthropologist himself. In this, Polo makes no mention of his informants, which adds to the anti-quantitative nature of his reports. One is left to wonder what the qualitative truth and the quantitative reality of these cities have to do with one another. But this is a question we must ask of all anthropologists, not just Marco Polo.

Polo is a colonizer and therefore his reports are irreparably tainted. But one must remember that Kublai Khan is *also* a colonizer, and that neither has the legitimate authority to speak on the subjects at hand. One must understand the conversation between Polo and the Khan as imperfect, and one must also find the blind spots—what *doesn’t* Polo say, and what *doesn’t* the Khan ask? What does he leave out in pursuit of his beautiful, laconic style? Power always plays. The stories Polo, a merchant from the vastly wealthy city-state of Venice reporting to Kublai Khan, the wealthiest emperor of the world’s largest empire, on the cities within that empire that he had opportunity to visit because of his merchant routes deserve at least a little skepticism.

What is remarkable about Polo’s reports is not their quantitative accuracy, nor their ability to truthfully represent the many ethnic groups and practices of people who live together within the Khan’s empire. Rather, Polo’s genius is his storytelling. It is the application of this genius that allows us to witness the utter brilliance of the cities that make up the Khan’s empire. What, again, are the stakes of a purely qualitative anthropology? This kind of anthropology is guided by an intentional and total renunciation of the idea that from the numbers of a place one can extrapolate the truth of a place. Polo reminds us that there is no such thing as a *city*. A city contains no inherent meaning. Without adherence to an idea, a truth that one can only convey through qualitative storytelling, a city becomes a mere collection of people in an odd shape. Contemporary scholars who wish to follow in Ruth Behar’s footsteps of becoming participant anthropologists or compassionate ethnographers would do well to follow Marco Polo’s lead and not merely acknowledge their selves in their work, but to fully become the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Kublai Khan’s word, not mine.